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**Painting and the Productive Paradox of the Marginal Phenomenon**

The most interesting aspect of the current discussion on painting is possibly the fact that it actually exists again. After theoretical discourse ignored the medium for a long time or–as in the case of Rosalind Krauss, for instance– categorically disputed the medium ‘s ability to find a contemporary answer to today’s artistic needs, the enthusiasm for a discursive debate with this obviously perpetually “undead medium”, as the art critic Kolja Reichert calls it[[1]](#footnote-1), has grown again significantly in the meantime.

Looking at the most significant contemporary theoretical developments, it becomes apparent, however, that – as different as their trajectories may be in detail- most critics approach painting *ex negativo*, as it were. For instance, in his book of 1990, *Painting as Model*, Yve-Alain Bois looks at painting from the perspective of grieving over its constantly imminent, but frequently delayed, demise.[[2]](#footnote-2) While Helmut Draxler, who draws an important distinction between the act of painting (which by the way he considers potentially obsolete) and painting (to which he definitely grants a future,) sees the medium’s merits mainly outside the fields of painting.[[3]](#footnote-3) For David Joselit, painting is only still conceivable if it stands beside itself, quite literally and figuratively. In this context, the decisive factor is no longer what the image as a painted object contains but the transitive performance that it carries inside itself by design, in other words the connectedness with other fields outside of the image and its response to its constituent basic framework.[[4]](#footnote-4) Finally, Isabelle Graw, who in the past ten years has worked systematically on painting as a medium, states in the introductory remarks to “Painting is Not the Issue “, in *Texte zur Kunst*, published in 2010, that the issue is the “discussion of the practice of painting for which matter the crux is not the question what constitutes painting at its core as a (guiding) medium within the arts, a specific genre and a symbolic institution.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

What all of these positions have in common is a quasi-paradox stance, whereby it is possible to detect currency and vitality in painting only by fading out the medium at the same time. One of the most significant reasons for the contradictory exorcising of the act of painting by shifting it to areas outside of the image and painting can still be seen in Clement Greenberg’s both radical and problematic attempt to define painting. According to him, the essence of painting consists of its reduction to the elementary components of paint on the canvas and stretcher and, therefore, can be understood exclusively in terms of its media-specific “flatness”, its structural flatness.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Indeed, from today’s perspective, Greenberg’s much discussed thesis of painting, which dissolves in the thematization of itself, must be considered a fantastical. In addition, it was primarily a hegemonic assertion expressed by American, more precisely New York, abstraction vis-à-vis the European surreal-figurative tradition in Europe, predominantly that of Paris. Still, it is remarkable that the understandable opposition to such an essentialist reductive point of view also calls into question the legitimacy of a media-specific view of painting, as does Isabelle Graw, who considers the medial specifics of painting as “having migrated a long time ago into other genres such as the huge photographs of the Becher-Schule [Becher School].[[7]](#footnote-7) The unwillingness to discuss specific general conditions of painting at least within the framework of the medium, has also been articulated in the exhibitions in recent years that were dedicated to painting. Starting with deutsche malerei zweitausenddrei (German painting two thousand and three), which was prompted by nothing more than the painterly production of a single year (just imagine if sculpture or photography had been treated in this way), to Painting Forever! (2013), a cooperative project in Berlin. In it, Kunstwerke Berlin showcased about eighty positions within painting close together in the ostentatious St. Petersburg hanging style (in whichworks are clustered together, thus documenting the absolute insignificance of each individual painting and the specific painterly expression in the context of the critical contextual “framing”. Even Painting 2.0 (2015) in the Brandhorst Museum Munich, most certainly the most ambitious and thoughtful exhibition on the current state of affairs of the medium, fell back in large sections on defining its subject matter as a structure of transitional networks. One can almost touch the mistrust toward all manner of immanent observation of painterly acts, not least Niklas Maak’s reckoning with figurative painting, to whose adepts he attributes a “Galapagos-syndrome” – that is, the state of living in a “biotope” untouched by the developments of an art critical debate regarding the medium of painting in which criteria such as quality, authorship, incarnate and painterly virtuosity are asserted once again.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Though attempts to isolate and extend privileges to the medium of painting need to be s rejected, and aspirations to save painting by means of ahistorical means focusing exclusively on immanent factors is doomed to failure, it needs to be noted that entirely excluding the idiosyncratic properties of painting is not likely to achieve a particularly enlightening objective, either. Unless see above– one were to accept the circular argument that no form of current painting still deals in any way with painting and that the act of painting no longer plays an integral part in constituting an image.

For instance, approaching Katharina Grosse’s ambitious work, which explores and questions painterly properties, foundations and challenges to the medium in a structural manner, it quickly becomes obvious that there are, indeed, ways to demonstrate the specificity of the medium without retreating into a romantic glorification of the act of painting. Looking at her work as a “convergence of a given surface with coloured material” (Ulrich Loock)[[9]](#footnote-9) in which potentially the whole of reality may become the painting ground, her approach also honours a specific momentum of painting. It also rejects a purely self-reflective concealment in favour of always pointing to relationships and actions directed toward creating connexions. The paintings by Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool or Charline van Heyl, to name just three of the highly praised positions in the discourse mentioned earlier, also veer in manifold ellipses and loops between questions that can, in truth, be solved only in a painterly fashion and by claiming they might be connected with meta-painterly questions at the same time. Whoever claims the impulse of the paintings could solely be found in – as Isabelle Graw suggests- “the result of an external experimental arrangement”,[[10]](#footnote-10) reduces the complex and paradoxical-dialectical process of pictorial genesis to one factor among many.

Achim Hochdörfer and his newly coined term of “mark making” is already more helpful here, that is, the creation of pictorial signs that, as it were,.[[11]](#footnote-11) A terminology such as this, which does not immediately engage in martial armament, would at least make it possible to speak of the properties of the brush and paint, in other words that which appears in the field of vision as a visible representation on the one hand, while, on the other, it remains an entirely abstract autonomous layer of paint. This should happen in a way without again immediately interpreting this “iconic difference” (Gottfried Boehm) as a signifier of the medial superiority of the alleged, and yet often toppled, royal discipline that is painting. The painterly marks would be applied here in the way of a non-judgemental difference strategy, as a marking of the medial difference that will need to be newly adjusted and interpreted regarding the meaning of the painting.

If one is prepared to concede that “no medium can be problematic in and by itself”, as Isabelle Graw posited in a 2011 lecture,[[12]](#footnote-12) this obviously needs to be true of painting as well, its immanent specifics once again deserving more attention. In this respect, Graw’s thesis might be understood as the claim that the affective qualities of painting have something to do with the special materiality of its marks. The way she sees it, these in turn, operate as a trigger for vitalist fantasies of painting: for instance, the idea that human properties could be directly transferred to the inanimate matter of the painting.[[13]](#footnote-13) Whether this perspective is helpful in getting to the heart of the matter remains to be seen, especially as this form of animist thinking could also be transferred to certain aspects of sculpture.

Before this backdrop, it seems all the more urgent and fitting to once again bring the debate on painting back to the classic perspective, the “panel painting”- though not to the limited carrier canvas. In this sense, the concept of our exhibition cannot be understood as a revanchist or anachronistic attempt to tie the medium once again to historic boundaries that we thought were overcome a long time ago and confining them. On the contrary, this is about pointing to the origin of painterly imagery in a kind of narrowing of perspective, while fully acknowledging the need for context and delineation that the medium of painting has had to confront for a long time. Doing so will point to an accompanying vitality that is often lost within discussions on painting that, shying away from its own subject matter, cannot handle it head-on.

As we know, many attempts have been made to define the authentic property of the painted image: from starting with the dialectic relationship between plane and depth, and between representation and presentation, to the “impression of what can be seen in the painting” (Max Imdahl), in other words the asynchronicity of the visibility of the painting and the gradual deciphering of the visible by the viewer. One will have to realise that these, too, merely cover partial aspects of the medium. This is certainly true of the relationship between picture field and picture margin, to which, interestingly, far less attention has been paid than to the dialectic conceptual pairs mentioned above. Understanding the path of painting during the last five decades as a process that led from “combine painting to the hybrid medium”[[14]](#footnote-14) would make it clear that the greater part of the discussion on painting has always been carried out with a desire to remove it from its classical field of view, resulting in the painted image seeming to have only a limited claim to being considered open to the world and reality.

Furthermore, implying that the contemporary discourse on painting is as “critical of context as it is open to context”,[[15]](#footnote-15) raises the question of why the dialectics between self-centeredness and awareness of the world have not been discussed more forcefully at the juncture where materially they appear most dramatically and in a metaphorical sense at the crossroads– at the point where the image is separated from its location in the space surrounding it and, on the other hand, also connected to it in a contradictory manner. Is it not, one might ask, this structural and unsolvable stress test that every image is subjected to on four sides by the margins that make the panel painting in its literal sense a marginal phenomenon and highly productive? In this manner, it thus becomes a virtual medium by asserting itself in space that, as a rule, has no connexion at all to the reality of the painting; and, since a pictorial field defined in such a manner is always ready to declare its own claim to totality, due to its paradoxical connexion between margin and content, it collides structurally with the demands of its surrounding spatial, and thus at the same time social, economic and political, realities. This collision would have been–the next assertion will claim- considered categorically different from a photographic or cinematic image, because the image margin of a photograph or a film runs between reality and is indexical with the connected image. The painterly reality, on the other hand, is inevitably designed as an invention that is categorically separated from reality, which would only apply in the case of photography or film if they were purely digital works.

Perhaps one should not assume that this “marginal phenomenon”, if one may thus call it metaphorically, is not only or not entirely a problem of a historically obsolete definition of painting. On the contrary, this form of limited playing field needs to be understood as one of the central conditions of the indestructible productivity and topicality of the medium.

This hypothesis can be tested by this exhibition, which hopes for nothing more or less than a general acknowledgment that a medium does not have to be excluded from current discourse simply because it refers also to its own foundations and gains strength from them.

1. Kolja Reichert “untot”, in: *The Happy Painting of Painting*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Hafner and Günter Reski, Cologne 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yve-Alain Bois, Painting as Model, Cambridge 1990, pp. 229–244. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Helmut Draxler, “Malerei als Dispositiv. Zwölf Thesen,” in: *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 77, March 2010, pp. 39–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself”, in: *October*, no. 130, 2009, pp. 125–134. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isabelle Graw and Andre Rottmann, Preface in: *Texte zur Kunst* (as note 3), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, in: Forum Lectures, “Voice of America”, Washington D.C. 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “’Die Malerei gibt es nicht.‘ Ein Gespräch zwischen Isabelle Graw und Achim Hochdörfer“, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 2010 (as note 3), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Niklas Maak, “Manufactum auf Leinwand“, in: *Texte zur Kunst* (as note 3), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Ulrich Loock, “Die Malerei von Katharina Grosse”, in: Katharina Grosse, ed. by Ulrich Loock, Annika Reich and Katharina Grosse, Cologne 2013, p.  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Graw (as note 7), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Isabelle Graw, „Malerei gegen Malerei? Vom Anti-Essenzialismus zum Subjektbild,“ in: *The Happy Fainting of Painting*, 2014 (as note 1) p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Isabelle Graw, Die Liebe zur Malerei, Zurich 2017, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hans-Jürgen Hafner and Gunter Reski, „Synergieeffekte nach der Moderne?“, in: *The Happy Fainting of Painting* (cf. note 11), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kolja Reichert, “Untot”, in: *The Happy Fainting of Painting* (cf. note 11), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)